DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 410 CS 503 048

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TITLE Rhetorical Sensitivity and Understanding.
PUB DATE Feb 80
NOTE 20p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Portland, OR, February 16-20, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults: College Students: *Communication (Thought Transfer): *Communication Research: *Communication Skills: *Dating (Social): Higher Education: *Individual Characteristics: *Interpersonal Competence

ABSTRACT

The relationship between understanding and rhetorical sensitivity was studied in the context of dating relationships. The hypothesis was that rhetorically sensitive persons would understand their dating partners better than persons who were not rhetorically sensitive. Subjects for the study were 34 dating couples in which one of the partners was enrolled in an introductory communication course. These subjects provided data by completing a two part questionnaire. The RHETSEN scale was used to measure rhetorical sensitivity, while a modified version of the Interpersonal Perception Method was used to gauge understanding. Correlational analyses failed to support the hypothesis. There were no significant correlations between rhetorical sensitivity and measures of understanding at the individual level. Two explanations for the results are (1) the apparent complexity of the rhetorically sensitive individual, and (2) differences between the attitudes and the behaviors of rhetorically sensitive persons. (RL)

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RHETORICAL SENSITIVITY AND UNDERSTANDING

Rhetorical sensitivity is an attitude toward encoding spoken messages. The history of this concept is explicated, beginning with its inception in 1972 and continuing through the present. Rhetorically sensitive persons are hypothesized to understand their significant others (dating partners) better than non-sensitive persons. The RHETSEN scale is the operational referent for rhetorical sensitivity and a modified version of the Interpersonal Perception Method operationally defines understanding. Results fail to support the hypothesis and are explained in terms of 1) the complexity of the rhetorically sensitive attitude, and 2) the potential behavioral prerequisites to understanding. New insights into rhetorical sensitivity and the RHETSEN scale are discussed, along with implications for future research.

Paper presented to the Western Speech Communication Association, Portland, Oregon, February, 1980.

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RHETORICAL SENSITIVITY AND UNDERSTANDING

Rhetorical sensitivity is an "attitude toward encoding spoken messages" (Hart, Eadie, & Carlson, 1979). Conceptualized in 1972 (Hart & Burks), the rhetorically sensitive attitude has been offered as the approach to communication that best promises to facilitate human understanding (cf., Hart, et al., 1972, 1975, 1979). If understanding is presumed to represent a principal communicative goal, and there exists an attitude which best facilitates its achievement, then identification of such an attitude would have considerable implications for communication theorists, educators, and practitioners. The present study is a beginning attempt to assess the validity of the Hart et al. claim, as the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and understanding is examined. Specifically, this investigation asks: Do rhetorically sensitive persons understand their significant others better than non-sensitive persons? In order to begin answering this question, a discussion and brief history of the rhetorical sensitivity concept follows.

Hart, et al. (1979) describe the five constituent parts of the rhetorically sensitive person:

1. "Interaction Consciousness" is deemed central and most important to the rhetorically sensitive attitude. A term borrowed from Goffman (1967), interaction consciousness is contrasted with self-consciousness and other-consciousness. It describes a concern for "both the sovereignty of the speaker's position as well as for the constraints placed upon him by the intellectual and attitudinal makeup of the other" (Hart & Burks, 1972).

2. "Avoidance of communication rigidity." Interpersonal and inventional flexibility are stressed. Each verbal exchange is guided by flexible discretion, according to situation and context.

3. "Tolerance for inventional searching." Form, as well as content, is recognized by the rhetorically sensitive person as an important determinant of how others will react to him. Such a person knows that "there are probably as many ways of making an idea clear as there are people" (Hart & Burks, 1972). The rhetorically sensitive individual takes the time to choose carefully among alternatives.

4. "Acceptance of personal complexity." Self and other are viewed as having a complex network of selves, only some of which are visible in social interchange. It is a necessary and desirable part of the human condition that there is "no single, immutable Real Self."

5. "Appreciation of the communicability of ideas." The rhetorically sensitive person realizes that some ideas and feelings are best not communicated at all. Some ideas, feelings and interpersonal situations are better met with silence.

While the idea has undergone some modification since its inception, these five parts characterize the construction of rhetorical sensitivity in its most recent form (cf., Hart, et al., 1972, 1975, 1979).

The concept has proved useful for several authors. Phillips (1976) and Phillips and Metzger (1976) employ rhetorical sensitivity as a point of departure for formulating an interpersonal rhetoric wherein intimate communication is examined from a rhetorical viewpoint. Hart, Eadie, and Carlson (1975) associate rhetorical sensitivity with communicative competence; that is, they suggest that the conceptualization may eventually help distinguish competent and incompetent communicators. Doolittle (1976) and Burks and Hart (1973) find rhetorical sensitivity applicable for discussing interpersonal conflict.

Some of the most fruitful work comes from Darnell and Brockriede (1976) who further contribute to the conceptual grounding of rhetorical sensitivity.

These authors help to distinguish the rhetorically sensitive attitude toward encoding from two other potential attitudes. Rhetorically sensitive persons are better understood when contrasted with Noble Selves and Reflectors. Noble Selves characterize those persons who "see any variation from their personal norms as hypocritical, as a denial of integrity, as a cardinal sin" (p. 176). Others' needs and/or situational constraints are secondary, if taken into account at all. Reflectors are persons who "have no Self to call their own. For each person and for each situation they present a new self" (p. 178). Pleasing others and being liked are important; and the situation and perceived needs of the othe dictate communicative choices. Sensitive persons have a repertoire of selves. Unlike Noble Selves, committed to a singular, inflexible, and foreordained self presentation, or Reflectors, who would construct a new presentation for each new person that they meet, Sensitive persons can draw from their repertoire the self they wish to present. Rhetorical sensitivity is cast as a moderation of the interpersonal rigidity of the noble self and the chameleon-like view of interaction evidenced by the reflector. Thus, sensitive persons occupy the mid-range of a continuum, the polar points of which are noble selves and reflectors (Darnell & Brockriede, 1976).

Conceptualizing the attitudes on a continuum extends the original, dichotomous notion discussed by Hart and Burks wherein rhetorical sensitivity was offered as an alternative to the "expressivist" (i.e., dialogic) approach to communication (1972). The newer formulations follow this continuum as Hart and colleagues (1979) go to "great pains to contrast the rhetorically sensitive attitude both to feckless machiavellianism (where ones ideas and feelings are sacrificed so as to placate others) and to unconscionable egoism (which prompts one to make messages without regard being given to the needs of the other)" (1975, p. 3). While all three labels are archetypal, they represent predominant attitudes toward communication.

The sensitive or mid-range attitude is promised to best facilitate human understanding (Hart, et al., 1979). This is a large promise. Achieving understanding is a principle goal of dyadic communication, and is therefore central to communication inquiry. Interest in the phenomenon goes beyond assessing the relative success of matching information received with information sent. In the dyadic context, understanding has also been studied as a function of how well $Person_1$ is able to understand the thoughts and feelings of $Person_2$ from the perspective of $Person_2$. Investigators have employed a variety of terms to assess and describe this second level of understanding. Such terms include empathy, perspective-taking, accuracy, consensus, and coorientation, to list a few (see, e.g., Chaffee, McLeod & Guerrero, 1960; Dymond, 1949; Johnson, 1977; Newcomb, 1953; Scheff, 1967; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967).

Coorientation offers the broadest approach to understanding as it subsumes most of the other constructs. While this approach is comprehensive, model and terminolog variation are confusing. Chaffee and associates review this literature, detail the origins and implications of the approach, and offer what is perhaps the best analysis in sorting out the confusion (Chaffee, et al., 1969; McLeod & Chaffee, 1973).

They suggest at least three variables of interest in coorientation. The first is agreement, which is the extent to which two persons actually agree on an object or issue toward which they are oriented. The second is termed accuracy (i.e., empathy, perspective-taking, understanding), the correctness with which they perceive one another's appraisal. The third variable is called congruency which describes the similarity between the perception of the other person's feeling and one's own.

Laing, Phillipsen, and Lee (1966) propose a three-tiered measurement model of coorientation-type variables. However, these authors contend that

it is the second, or even a third level of understanding (metaperspective and meta-metaperspective) that is most crucial in dyadic relationships. They argue that inconsiderateness, lack of trust, and even maliciousness result from discrepant expectations and misunderstanding of perspectives. Other investigators agree that much dysfunctional communication can be traced to misunderstandings of this kind (e.g., Drewery, 1969; Haley, 1963; Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967). Following Dymond's seminal work on empathy (1949), Laing, et al. offer the Interpersonal Perception Method (IPM) to detect what they call agreement, understanding, and realization of understanding. The IPM is utilized in the current study.

The present investigation will attempt to discover the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and understanding. If rhetorical sensitivity best promises to facilitate human understanding, as Hart and colleagues suggest, then we would expect that sensitive persons would understand their significant others better than would noble selves or reflectors. Interaction consciousness, the central and most important aspect of the attitude, implies that the rhetorically sensitive person attempts to view communicative encounters from multiple perspectives--those of self and other. Merging perspectives should yield a more accurate picture of the interaction, and thus increase understanding.

Darnell and Brockriede (1976) similarly claim that sensitive persons aim at accurate empathic understanding--in both directions. Empathy is achieved through the tentative adoption and projection of perspectives. Noble selves and reflectors are not similarly motivated.

This notion is consistent with Hart, Eadie and Carlson's suggested association of sensitivity and communication competence (1975). Most descriptions of interpersonal competence include empathy, perspective-taking, or

some version of this level of understanding as an attribute (see e.g., Argyris, 1962; Bochner & Kelly, 1974, Weinstein, 1966; Wiemann, 1977). If sensitive persons are competent communicators, we would expect that they are capable of greater understanding than non-sensitive or incompetent communicators.

Another reason to predict greater understanding for sensitive persons involves the inventional flexibility and searching that is characteristic of the sensitive attitude. Persons with such attributes might be expected to better understand, predict, and take the perspective of others (Bieri, 1955; Delia & Clark, 1977; Hale & Delia, 1976) than those who are more rigid or myopic.

The current study attempts to assess the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and understanding in the context of dating relationships. Dating relationships serve a wide variety of functions including social skill development, social recreation, extending communication networks, and selecting a mate (see, e.g., Delora, 1963; Lowrie, 1948; Skipper & Nash, 1966). Exclusive dating relationships of one month or longer are presumed to comprise two significant others in this investigation.

Specifically, the hypothesis of this study is that rhetorically sensitive persons will better understand their dating partners than non-rhetorically sensitive persons.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedures

For this study there were 34 dating couples (n = 68) in which one of the partners was enrolled in an introductory communication course at a large American university. Students currently in exclusive dating relationships of one month or longer were asked to volunteer. Students in dating relationships

became subjects if both they and their partner volunteered participation. Both partners were assured confidentiality and anonymity.

Subjects were asked to fill out a two part questionnaire concerning "communication and dating couples." Subjects were required to fill out the questionnaire individually, and not talk about them until after they were returned, since conference might affect the results. Sealed envelopes and elaborate instructions were provided toward this safeguard.

Instruments

The operational referents for rhetorical sensitivity and understanding were gleaned from the two part questionnaire. Each will be discussed in turn.

Hart, Eadie and Carlson (1975, 1979) report a series of studies in which the concepts of rhetorical sensitivity (RS), noble self (NS), and rhetorical reflector (RR) are operationalized via the RHETSEN measuring instrument. After several years of item and factor analysis and scale development, the final forty item scale was shown to be reliable and valid in measuring the rhetorically sensitive attitude toward encoding (cf., Hart, et al., 1975, 1979). Internal reliability was satisfactory for RS and NS scales (.76 and .80), but unduly low for the RR scale (.63). Test/retest reliability (N = 63 with interval of three weeks) was fairly high for all three scales (.84, .87 and .84). Criterion-related validity for RS was encouraging, though unavailable for NS and RR. Items tapping NS and RR scales were gleaned from the RHETSEN instrument in a decidedly post-hoc manner. Therefore, use of these subscales is exploratory only. A complete description of the RHETSEN instrument can be found in Hart, et al. (1979). The instrument provided operationalization of rhetorical sensitivity, noble self, and rhetorical reflector, in the current investigation. It comprised the first section of the two part questionnaire.

The operational definition of understanding was drawn from a slightly modified version of the Interpersonal Perception Method (IPM) offered by Laing, et al. (1966). Three modifications follow Grove and Hayes (1978) who provided a computerized scoring technique (IPALION) for an otherwise unwieldy scoring procedure. (1) Language was changed so that female respondents need not transform pronouns prior to responding. (2) Questionnaire form was also changed for clearer and easier reading. (3) A third modification includes forced choice response (yes-no) as opposed to the very true, slightly true, slightly untrue very untrue possibilities in the original IPM. The current study also eliminates items that were deemed redundant or inapplicable to dating couples (the original version was designed for married partners). All else remains the same.

The two parties are designated "P" and "O" (person and other). The current instrument consists of 24 issues, each referring to a relational attribute; e.g., respects, expects too much of, analyzes. Each issue is divided into four aspects and three levels of perception. The four aspects of an issue consist of the combinations of person and other; i.e., PO, OP, PP, and OO. For example, using the issue of "analyzes," the aspects are : I analyze her, she analyzes me, I analyze myself, and she analyzes herself.

The three levels of perception are (1) the direct, (2) the understanding, and (3) the realization of understanding levels. The direct level response simply affirms or denies each of the four aspects of the issue, e.g., I analyze her, etc. At the understanding level each response predicts how the partner would respond to the same set of questions. At the realization level each respondent registers his/her predictions of his/her partner's predictions. Thus, each partner responds to 12 items (4 aspects times 3 levels) on each issue. All responses require a binary decision.

The IPALION scoring technique provides summary scores for each partner and separates agreement, understanding, and realization aspects. The operational referents for understanding in the current study includes both the individual and dyadic levels. A third check on understanding is provided by the first issue in the IPM section of the questionnaire: "understands." The 24 IPM items comprised the second portion of the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Correlational analyses (Pearson r) failed to support the hypothesis. There were no signifcant correlations between rhetorical sensitivity and any of the three measures of understanding at the individual level. Rhetorical sensitivity showed little relationship to total IPM understandings ($r = -.04$, n.s.), to total IPM realizations of understanding ($r = -.01$, n.s.), or to the conjunctions (correct predictions only) on the IPM issue, "understands" ($r = -.12$, n.s.). Significance was not attained when comparing noble selves with the three measures of understanding ($r = .01$, n.s., $r = -.11$, n.s. respectively) at the individual level. The same was true for rhetorical reflectors ($r = .12$, $r = .10$, and $r = .003$, all n.s.). First and second order partial correlations failed to identify variables (e.g., length of time dating, RR, and/or NS) suppressing the effects of all relationships tested (above).

Four additional sets of analyses were conducted. (1) Two-tailed t tests for sex differences on the six variables all showed negligible differences; all non-significant. (2) Correlational analyses showed no significant differences between length of dating and any of the six referents measured. (3) Correlational analyses of an individual's RS, NS, and RR scores with his/her partner's score on the three IPM measures showed no signifcant relationships.

(4) Finally, zero-order correlations on the RHETSEN variables yielded results very similar to Hart, et al. (1979) and are reported in Table I. Table II reports the zero-order correlations run for the IPM measures.

TABLE I

ZERO-ORDER RHETSEN CORRELATIONS

	RS	NS	RR
RS	--	-.85*	-.29**
NS	--	--	-.16+
RR	--	--	--

*$p < .001$
**$p < .01$
+$p < .18$, n.s.

TABLE II

ZERO-ORDER IPM CORRELATIONS

	IU	UT	RT
IU	--	.55*	.50*
UT	--	--	.89*
RT	--	--	--

IU = the issue understands
UT = understanding totals
RT = realization totals
*$p < .001$

DISCUSSION

Failure to support the hypothesis may be explained in several ways, but it seems that two accounts are most accurate and useful. The first explanation is the most conservative: that there is no relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and understanding in this context.

This suggestion implies that the five characteristics of the rhetorically sensitive attitude are working at cross purposes to one another with regard to the understanding variable. It will be recalled that the five characteristics

are: (1) interaction consciousness, (2) avoidance of communication rigidity, (3) tolerance for inventional searching, (4) appreciation of the communicability of ideas, and (5) acceptance of personal complexity. I argued earlier that the first three attributes should generate increased understanding. It is possible that the last two attributes inhibit greater understanding of one's significant others.

That there is no significant relationship between persons' RS scores and partners' understanding measures supports this conclusion. It may be that a sensitive person's appreciation of the communicability of ideas leads him or her to be silent on some issues that the IPM taps. Rhetorical sensitivity is an "instrumental" approach to communication (Hart & Burks, 1972), and it may not be all that advantageous to express ones position on "dependence," "doubting," "loves," or other difficult IPM issues. The rhetorically sensitive person realizes that "some ideas (no matter how phrased) are situationally bereft of rhetorical impact" (Hart & Burks, 1972, p. 85), and that "even some of our most prized feelings should not, sometimes, be communicated..." (Hart, et al., 1979, p. 4). Thus, the silence that is sometimes characteristic of the sensitive person may have a mediating effect on other attributes that evoke understanding.

Acceptance of personal complexity also may function to inhibit understanding. If someone has a repertoire of selves from which to draw, he/she may be more difficult to "read" or understand since different selves are shown at different times. This person might bring more aspects of self (selves) to interaction than the non-sensitive person, and hence be more confusing than predictable.

While this interpretation suggests why a sensitive person may be difficult to understand, it does not directly explain the lack of relationship

between RS and understanding of the other. However, it leads to the conclusion that interaction consciousness is not necessarily the core characteristic tapped by the RHETSEN scale. There would be no significant relationship between RS and understanding if a sensitive person's ability to blend or merge perspectives is overshadowed by other characteristics; i.e., acceptance of personal complexity and appreciation of the communicability of ideas.

The efforts of Hart, Eadie and Carlson (1979) to validate their RHETSEN scale partially supports this interpretation. Correlational analyses of RHETSEN and selected socio-psychological scales and instruments generally showed relationships in the hypothesized directions. However, all correlations were of relatively low magnitude (see appendix). This led Hart and colleagues to conclude that the instrument is "tapping a construct not previously dealt with in the socio-psychological literature" (p. 19). While reasonable, it seems that Hart, et al. also neglected to account for the "other" RS attributes. That is, comparisons with other instruments were based on the presumptions that a valid RHETSEN scale would (1) find a rhetorically sensitive person as one who avoided self centered and socially determined invention, and (2) point up the interaction consciousness thought to be at the heart of the RS attitude (p. 18). The other RS attributes may have blurred the expected associations. The "confusing, even labyrinthine, factor structure" (p. 15) is consistent with this assessment. So are the results of the current study, which also focused on the first three characteristics when predicting greater ability to understand.

So one explanation for the results of this investigation involves the apparent complexity of the rhetorically sensitive individual as identified by the RHETSEN scale. This raises a second, though related, interpretation. It is possible that there is another factor standing between attitudes and understanding: behavior.

It may be that subjects possessing a particular attitude might not behave in ways that reflect this attitude. Rhetorically sensitive persons may be predisposed to better understand their significant others, but behave in ways that do not result in accurate understanding of the other's perspective. This could be due to skill deficiency, lack of cooperation from one's partner, even the potential silence mentioned earlier. For example, Berger, et al. (1976) discuss strategies for knowledge generation and interpersonal understanding. Interrogation and self-disclosure (via reciprocal disclosure) are among the behaviors listed. If a rhetorically sensitive person does not engage in such behaviors, chances of interpersonal understanding seem less likely. In other words, there may be behavioral prerequisites to understanding that do not necessarily follow the rhetorically sensitive attitude.

Future research must then take several directions. Rhetorical sensitivity is an attitude, and therefore subject to the multitude of considerations accompanying any such condition (see, e.g. Siebold, 1975). RHETSEN, in particular, is a relatively new scale. It attempts to tap a dense, subtle, and complex construct (Hart, et al., 1979) --an attitude toward encoding spoken messages. Exploratory work with RHETSEN should continue to see how RS compares with scores on other instruments. Cognitive complexity scales, self disclosure reports, and measures of communication apprehension would be likely candidates. Research into behavioral correlates of the rhetorically sensitive attitude is also warranted. This research is now in progress.

It is possible too, that the rhetorically sensitive attitude is not in its fullest force in the context of dating or other significant relationships. As Darnell and Brockriede (1976) point out, the sensitivity continuum is affected by interpersonal, situational, and ideational dimensions. Future research might also vary the contexts in which rhetorical sensitivity is studied. The investigation of understanding may also benefit from varied research contexts.

Understanding, as a variable, will require a great deal of conceptual and empirical work before its precise, theoretical relationship to communication can be explicated (see, e.g., Berger, et al., 1976). Intensive study of individuals or dyads scoring high on measures of understanding should be useful in generating behaviors, attitudes, and conditions associated with such success.

Question asking and listening skills may be positively related to understanding. While length of relationship made no difference in the current investigation, it seems likely that at some level this variable has a significant effect. Other potential intervening variables might include motivation, power in the relationship, and partner behavior.

As yet, the major promise of rhetorical sensitivity--that it will best facilitate human understanding--remains unverified. However, the potential importance of both of these variables warrants prompt and continual work.

APPENDIX +

PARTIAL CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RHETSEN

AND SELECTED SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL MEASURES

Comparison Measures	RS Scale (minus NS)	RS Scale (minus RR)	NS Scale (minus RS)	RR Scale (minus RS)
Speech anxiety (McCroskey, 1970)	.02	.09	.04	.03
P-style (Ring & Wallston, 1968)	-.12*	-.06	-.08	.11
Preferred co-worker (Fiedler, 1967)	.21	.20	.02	.10
Self-monitering (Snyder, 1974)	.11	.15*	.01	-.12
Focus of control (Rotter, 1966)	-.19*	-.02	-.18*	.18*
C-style (Ring & Wallston, 1968)	-.13*	-.20**	-.26**	.24**
Social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964)	-.22**	-.10	-.16*	.13*
Interpersonal competence (Holland & Baird, 1968)	.13*	.04	.16*	-.20**
R-style (Ring & Wallston, 1968)	.18**	-.05	.21**	-.22**

*p _ .05
**p _ .01
+(adapted from Hart et al., (1979))

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